

1916: First group of spiritual daughters in San Giovanni Rotondo

Rachelina Russo and her niece Rachelina Gisolfi who had met him earlier in the year 1916 in Foggia, asked Padre Pio to meet with some devout souls of the town of San Giovanni Rotondo. At first he rejected the idea, then after much insistence, he agreed.

Nina Campanile in her diary 'Memories of Padre Pio' (Memorie sul Padre Pio) described: In 1916 'The first group of souls around Padre Pio from the first moment he came to the convent were: Rachelina Russo and her nieces, the sisters Vittorina, Elena, and Filomena Ventrella, the sisters Giovanna Lucia Fiorentino, Maria Ricciardi, sister of Father Ambrogio, Maddalena Cascavilla. 'On October 5, 1916, after Padre Pio had returned definitely in September, the group was joined by me Nina Campanile and my sister Lucietta. Few months later joined the sisters Maria Antonietta Pompilio and **Filomena Fini.**'

The group used to meet in the guest area of the convent every Thursday and Sunday.

Nina Campanile in her diary: ' He explained that the principal means of Christian perfection are: the choice of a saint and learned director, frequentation of sacraments, meditation, spiritual readings.' 'He used to say: 'the sacred argumentations need always to be sustained by sacred examples.' 'He wanted that we meditate twice a day, morning and evening.'

'He insisted a lot on daily meditation "Even with the face on the ground, like Jesus did in Gethsemane." "It is important to meditate, even if there is no emotion involved."

In 1916 Antonietta Pompilo asked Padre Pio how to meditate. He started talking about the agony in the Gethsemane, and then he went into ecstasy. For about an hour he stayed with his eyes closed, without moving. Then he returned to his normal self and said: "**God be blessed. Let's continue.**"

Assunta Di Tomaso from Casacalenda (Campobasso), became a spiritual child of Padre Pio on September 24, 1916, and received several letters from Padre Pio for spiritual direction. After the death of her parents she moved to San Giovanni Rotondo. Margherita Tresca started her spiritual direction with Padre Pio on December 20, 1917. She received letters for 4 years from him.

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Padre Pio and Filomena Fini



Filomena Fini was one of the very first spiritual children of Padre Pio. During her whole life she followed with determination Padre Pio's direction, embracing penance and suffering.

Padre Pio and Filomena Fini

by Marianna lafelice

Padre Pio was for many women the "companion of their souls," a relationship that is perhaps hard to comprehend in today's hedonistic world with its false and shallow image of women. But today's women are not just those glamorous TV presenters and eternally young showgirls. The women of today also include women like the Burmese politician and Nobel peace laureate Aung Saan Suu Kyi, as well as countless other lesser-known women like those many anonymous Afghans who nevertheless have the same aspirations for truth and reality even though living in a world and in times that does everything to negate them.

It is in this world of women that I had in mind when I wrote this article about Filomena Fini and her association with Padre Pio. Women who lived important parts of their lives close to him and who were able to share in his prayer life as well as the misunderstandings and trials of his life. This story is about a woman who like many women who surrounded Padre Pio, were wives, mothers, religious nuns, who were from nobility, famous economists, ordinary laborers, politicians as well as women who left the world to enter convents and so demonstrate, without "makeup or camouflage," how every woman is unique, complex, many faceted and very difficult to iconize.

Filomena Fini was one of the very first of Padre Pio's spiritual children. She was a wife and a mother, sadly neither of which, because of the difficult and uncertain times, she can lived to the full. She was born in San Giovanni Rotondo in 1891, the daughter of Francesco and Teresa Fini and her birth coincided almost with the beginning of the 20th century, a century that would bring about many colossal changes sometimes for the better and other times for the worse.

In a certain sense Filomena was a tragic victim of the First World War that began the new century. On 15 May 1913, she was married to Christoforo Fiorentino, the brother of Lucietta, also a spiritual daughter of Padre Pio. Just two years later when she was only 24 years old she found herself a widow raising a small son Giuseppe. On 24 May 1915, her husband was called to arms and like so many other young Italian women she found herself alone, and uncertain that he would ever return. Her son was only a few days old. Filomena at the time was living in the family home of her husband's parents and her sister-in-law's.



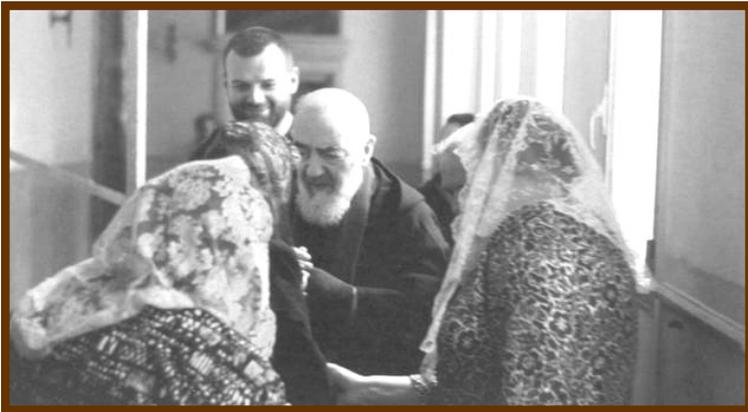
Filomena Fini in 1913 married Cristoforo Fiorentino, brother of Lucia Fiorentino, also a spiritual child of Padre Pio. Widowed at age 28. She went daily to Padre Pio's Mass.

She wrote a diary "News on Padre Pio".
"To follow Padre Pio means that it takes a lot of suffering."

How Filomena had to change over the years! Once she had recovered from her mourning, from those dark days of her life, she was able, as one would say today, to re-find that "creative side" within her, to discover her inner resources and create a new way of life and relationship with others and the world in a life guided and motivated by charity. She would join the Franciscan Third Order and become its leader until shortly before her death in 1965.

Padre Pio assisted her in overcoming her fears and to confront life again, just as a child overcomes the fear of the dark. His harsh and abrupt treatment taught her how to walk alone with her own two legs in the spiritual life, so that no darkness could ever again distract her from that spiritual light that she so fervently and humbly wished to attain.

Filomena was born a woman who had the good fortune to meet Padre Pio and to find true life!



**"Once I take a soul on,
I also take on their entire family as my spiritual children."**

From the letters Filomena received from her husband, she understood that he was going to be sent to the front lines of battle in the very near future. "At home there was no more peace and they were always crying and praying." In the month of August, the news of Cristoforo's death began to be rumored in the village. Then a letter of his arrived, telling of a terrible wound that he had received and which to a certain extent roused their hopes: "Dear father, dear sisters, dear Filomena, I have been wounded... I hope in the Lord... pray for me." The news of the letter was shattering. Filomena at once sent a reply, hoping that her words could reach him as soon as possible. Cristoforo, however, who had been wounded on 12 August, died six days later, the same day Filomena received his letter, even though she would not be officially informed of his death until 20 August, by the mayor of the town.

The details of Filomena's life with all its hardship can be pieced together from two important sources: a Diary that she kept and which she referred to as her "Notes on Padre Pio," as well as his sister-in-law Lucietta's Diary. From these notes of her memoirs of the Padre, will learn how Filomena met the "holy friar," during her father-in-law's sickness, and how he even came to their home for a visit; and from these pages, they give a real insight into her life, we are able to reconstruct and personally observe how their relationship grew day by day.

Filomena's widowhood meant also that she was to a certain extent forced to become "strong like a man," because of the sudden overwhelming state of affairs that faced her. Day and night a thought would torment her: "if I die my child will be left an orphan also of his mother." This fear, Filomena was able to confide to Padre Pio on a visit to the friary. In actual fact, that day Filomena was able to say little to him, or rather she was unable to say what she had wanted to, but Padre Pio who had understood everything, whispered to her, "Your time of exile is not over. You still have a long life ahead of you."

Reassured and comforted by his words, Filomena was able to continue with her life with more tranquility. But, yet another trial, perhaps even more painful, awaited her at her still very young age. Her son Giuseppe fell ill. Filomena, did all she could to save his life and sent a friend to Padre Pio for his advice as to whether or not she should send her son to a specialist in Foggia. But the answer that came back from the Padre was quite clear: "Where do you want to take your son, if he is already dead?" For Filomena, her son's death meant the end of a dream. She had placed her hopes in him and she would write in her diary: "I was in a sea of desolation, my dreams for my son came tumbling down, and I can find no consolation."

The death of a husband, as painful as it can be, is something that can be expected and got over, but the death of a son is like a rent in the stomach that, put bluntly lasts forever. Filomena, however, again promptly received consolation from Padre Pio who, unable to visit her because of poor health, wrote a letter, "after one has given free vent to one's tears for someone dear to one, it is necessary to arise and obey one's higher self, where the spirit of the Faith resides, as on a throne, and that must console one in one's afflictions." (Letters III).

After a month of intense mourning, Filomena began to visit the friary again. She left the home of her in-laws and went back to living with her mother, to the great displeasure of her sister-in-law, Lucietta.

Then, with the arrival of the Spanish flu in San Giovanni Rotondo, a further tragedy awaited her. In the month of December 1919, her mother died. In her diary we read: "At the age of 28, I find myself alone without my parents, without my husband and without my son, without the persons most dear to me. Everything seems to have come to an end."

Filomena would hear no talk of remarrying, and refused the proposals of suitors who promised to provide and support her. And one day while talking to Padre Pio she mentioned how she felt that she could no longer rely or believe in the sincerity of anyone's love for her, and the Padre said to her simply: "My love for you is sincere."

Encouraged by these words, Filomena was able to entrust herself to her saintly spiritual guide, even though she would candidly confess that "One must suffer a lot when one follows Padre Pio." The reproofs, scolding's and other ways that he used with his spiritual children, in fact could really cause heart rendering agonies. But Filomena accepted the challenge. She wanted to succeed and embraced "with all her heart the spiritual life."

Filomena rid herself of her jewels. She sought to no longer follow the fashions which were "something very dear to me," she confessed, and only to hear herself again scolded by the Padre: "You are still worldly." These words after all her efforts must have sounded very harsh to her, but Filomena was not discouraged. She ended some friendships that the Padre considered imprudent but only to hear him say: "You are still not converted."

Filomena's suffering was intense. Every day, in obedience to Padre Pio, she attended Mass at the friary and on some days when she left home, she felt as if she was ascending Calvary, her Calvary. Nevertheless she knew she had to obey and would say: "How beautiful it is to be near a Saint, even though one suffers so much!"

In fact, once when her suffering had become extreme she asked the Padre rather insolently, "But must one suffer so much in the spiritual life?" And when he tersely answered her, "The Spiritual Life means to die to oneself!," Filomena responded almost at once, "But I do not want to die," in fact death was the last thing she desired. But from that day on she noticed that the Padre's treatment of her was no longer quite so harsh and abrupt. His approach to her altered and on one occasion he explained to her and the other spiritual daughters: "You must realize that the way I treat you is not at whim, but is God's very will."

This is how Filomena was guided by Padre Pio in the spiritual life to conversion and to detachment from the world. She obeyed Padre Pio blindly, despite the immense suffering, remembering always what he once confided to her: "What matters to me is your soul and not your state in life."